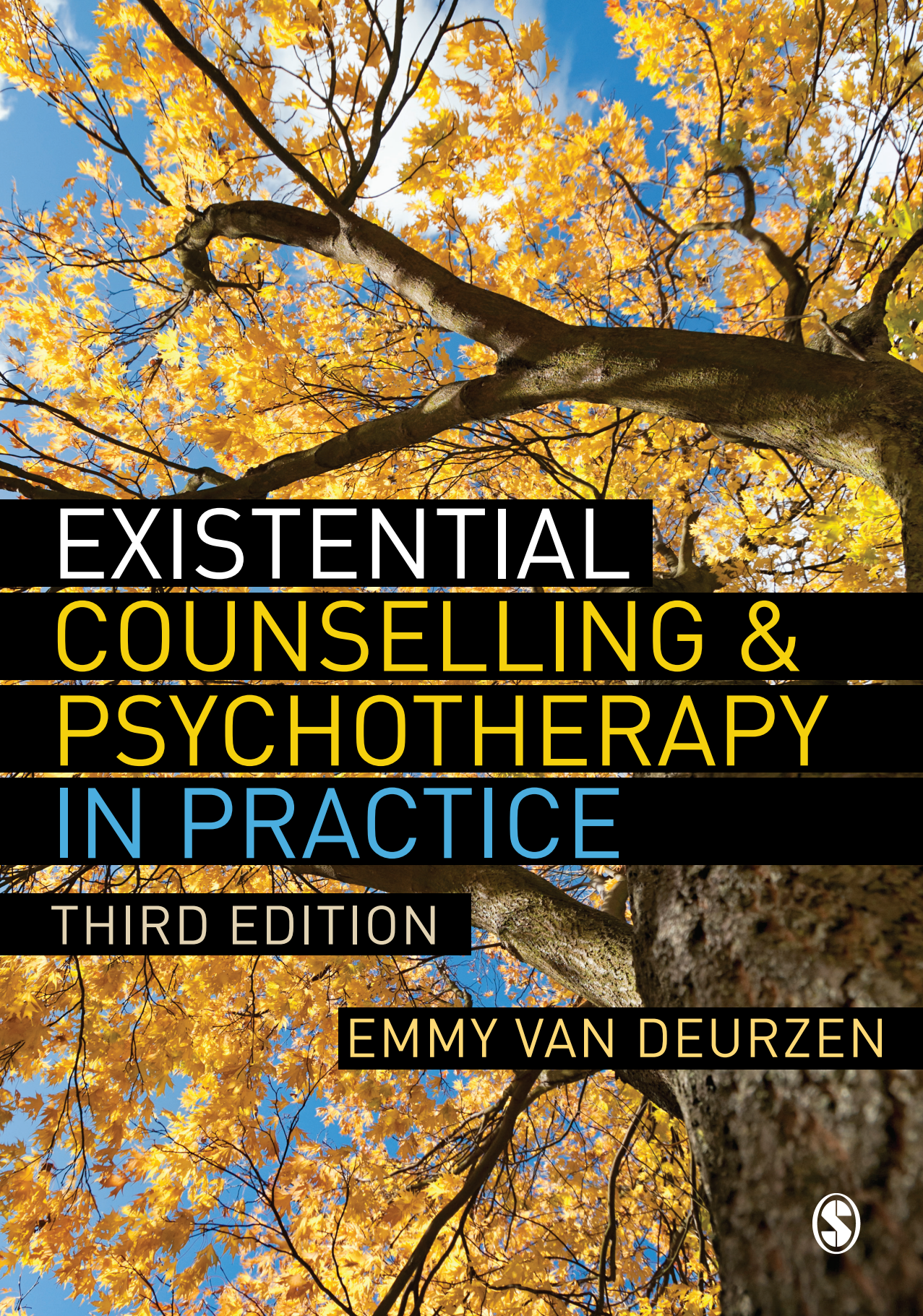
EXISTENTIAL
COUNSELLING &
PSYCHOTHERAPY
IN PRACTICE
THIRD EDITION
EMMY VAN DEURZEN

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SAGE Publications Ltd
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
B 1/I 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road
New Delhi 110 044

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd
3 Church Street
#10-04 Samsung Hub
Singapore 049483

First edition published 1988
Second edition published 2002. Reprinted in 2002, 2003, 2005, 2006 (twice), 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011
This third edition published 2012

Editor: Alice Oven
Assistant editor: Kate Wharton
Production editor: Rachel Burrows
Copyeditor: Sarah Bury
Proofreader: Derek Markham
Marketing manager: Tamara Navaratnam
Cover design: Lisa Harper
Typeset by: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

MIX
Paper from responsible sources
FSC® C013604

Library of Congress Control Number: 2011944790

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-84920-067-7
ISBN 978-1-84920-068-4 (pbk)

To my children and stepchildren: Benjamin, Sasha, Robert and Grace

Everything has been figured out, except how to live.

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

Contents

About the Author

Emmy van Deurzen is an international authority on existential therapy who lectures worldwide and whose work has been translated into many languages. She is the founder and principal of the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling in London and a visiting professor with Middlesex University. She also directs Dilemma Consultancy and the Existential Academy, in London and Sheffield. She was previously the founder and first Dean of the School of Psychotherapy at Regent's College and she was also the first chair of the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy. It was her initiative in forming the Society for Existential Analysis and its journal *Existential Analysis*, in 1988, the same year this book was first published, which established the field of existential psychotherapy and counselling in the United Kingdom.

Preface

I first wrote this book in the middle of the 1980s, when counselling and psychotherapy were rapidly developing in the United Kingdom. I had been teaching the subject for nearly ten years, suffering from the lack of any text that made direct and practical connections between existential philosophy and therapy. In the 1970s I had worked in psychiatric hospitals and therapeutic communities before becoming a trainer and I had developed a personal way of working based more on my philosophical than on my psychological training. I had certainly drawn on the continental methods of Binswanger and Boss, and had been greatly inspired and encouraged by Laing's work, which had brought me to the United Kingdom from France ten years previously to work in an 'anti-psychiatric' therapeutic community and crisis centre.

Very rapidly I had come to the conclusion that I had to formulate and develop on my own what I had looked for in others in vain. So, from 1978 onwards I formulated and taught my own version of existential therapy in a variety of training institutes, including the Arbours Association, Antioch University and South West London College, and I started speaking at conferences on the subject as well. I created numerous handouts and diagrams and put my formulation in print in the early 1980s as part of a book by Windy Dryden. Finding a publisher for a book dedicated to existential therapy proved more difficult. It was thanks to Farrell Burnett, who was an editor with Sage Publications at the time, that the project got under way.

I found it a great challenge as well as a great comfort to finally write the book that had been germinating in my mind for such a long time and that I so wished had existed in the early 1970s when I tried to establish my philosophical practice with my patients in France. The challenge was to dare to write down what it was that I actually believed in and practised, rather than hide behind other people's findings or research. The comfort was to find that it was possible to make sense of such a personal approach and communicate it so that it could be understood and transmitted.

My ideas had been generated through living, studying, working with clients, teaching, supervising and training. This continues to be true today. It goes without saying that I am therefore indebted to all those people who have been there with me in that process: colleagues, students, clients, supervisees, family members and friends. When I first wrote the book, I thought of this account of my position as but a fragment of what was possible and I knew that much would be needed to complete and amend it. Little did I know that the book would give me the courage to found the Society for Existential Analysis and to develop many more training courses in existential psychotherapy and counselling and write many further books. I had certainly no idea that

existential therapy would attract so much interest over the next decades and establish itself as a viable approach in the UK and worldwide.

It was a wonderful experience for me when people began to rally round and a continuous dialogue was established through the Society for Existential Analysis, which served as a platform for the approach. Many experienced therapists recognized their own way of working and enthusiastically joined the existential movement or were trained in the approach. Thousands of new existential therapists were trained, not just through the dedicated training institutes, but also in mainstream courses, which began to include existential therapy in their basic curricula. Existential therapy is now well established in the UK, and across many European countries the interest in this way of working is acute and vibrant, especially so in Denmark, Sweden, Eastern Europe, Portugal, Ireland and Greece. There are also centres across Asia, Latin America, Australia and the USA. The movement has its own history of splitting and fighting and there is a healthy disagreement about what existential work should be. One can only hope that such tensions will be allowed to continue and that they may be used creatively by people dialoguing and debating with each other. It would be a great shame if the existential approach became rigidified and reduced to yet another method with a fixed dogma. It is the freedom and the openness of the approach that I have always valued and I think it is this that has attracted many readers to this book.

It has been wonderful to find that the existential ideas are relevant and useful to counsellors and psychotherapists of all orientations. The existential approach does not seek to be a technique or a rival school, but rather is a different way of viewing the world and human living and so it allows for integration of other methods in a disciplined philosophical way. Those who are prepared to take existential therapy seriously usually find something in it that speaks to them directly. Frequently, people feel that the approach expresses what they have thought themselves for a long time but could not quite articulate. Quite often people feel that their outlook and attitudes are drastically and definitively transformed as a result of finding a framework for living. The same process occurs with clients who also find that they can begin to think about themselves differently and in a more open way, as they allow themselves to focus on those things that really matter to them rather than remaining trapped in their intra-psychic prisons.

The ideas in the book are taken from many sources but I have intentionally kept this book simple and uncluttered with references. My own background and early development have contributed just as much to my existential view of the world as my formal education and training. Anna and Arie, my parents, have certainly contributed much to my way of looking at the world by introducing me to a broad range of religions and to international travel from a very young age. I am grateful for what they taught me about life. Much else was inspired by the works of some of my favourite philosophers, including Socrates, Spinoza, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Sartre. It will be obvious that I take the contributions of many practitioners for granted, although I seldom refer to them specifically. Freud, Binswanger, Boss, Jaspers, Laing and May were a few of the most influential ones at the time I wrote the book.

There is no doubt that having been able to exchange ideas, experience and insights with those close to me has been a crucial factor in the clear formulation and critical consideration of my work. You can only write about reality if you let yourself be challenged by it. My changing and growing family have always been a source of inspiration, challenge and support in coming to terms with the tasks of life that this book is concerned with. The transformations in my own family life over the decades have made me aware of the importance of formulating steadily what is learned in one generation and passing it on to the next. I have therefore dedicated the book to my children and stepchildren. Not only have they been my touchstones of reality, they have helped me keep my eye on what matters and they have forced me to keep my mind open and clear rather than closed and complacent. But I also want to acknowledge the support I was given by David Smith at the time I first wrote this book. Our paths have since parted, but his contribution to my early work remains intact. However, the vigorous challenges and support of my husband, Digby Tantam, continue to help me learn from life and to live in a loving and creative way. The closeness of our relationship has sustained me through some deep crises, some of which were strangely prefigured in this book. It has taught me that it really is possible to keep exploring and developing as a person, even when life is at a low. It has also shown me that love is by far the best antidote to fear.

Finally, it is necessary and fitting to mention the students who encouraged me in the writing of this book, since it is their enthusiasm that spurred me on to complete this project in the first place. The many students and trainees who have since commented on it have kept my thinking alive and focused. I thank them for it.

In the revision of the book for new editions I have to balance the need for renewal with the desire to hold on to what is good about the old. I have, on the whole, opted to stay with the original simplicity of this text and to reserve new ideas for other publications. This book will always be the pioneering text it was in the 1980s and it will continue to show the way to many new therapists wishing to include existential understanding in their work. The message of the existential approach that comes through this most loudly and clearly is that the fundamental objective of existential work is to enable people to rediscover their own values, beliefs and their life's purpose. The goal of existential therapy is to experience yourself as real again, or perhaps for the first time ever. This means that you come to know yourself in light of human limitations and possibilities and that you engage wholeheartedly with life in the way that is most satisfactory to you. I hope that this book will continue to show counsellors and psychotherapists how to apply such ideas in practice so that they can become more effective at helping people to find the purpose and meaning in their lives that they had not been able to find before.

This book is predominantly intended for therapists who are already practising as well as for those still in training. It outlines specific methods of working with people from an existential perspective. As this perspective is philosophical in addition to being therapeutic, the book is, in a wider sense, relevant to anyone interested in exploring existential concerns. The focus throughout is on practical application.

The type of counselling and therapy proposed involves assisting people to come to terms with the dilemmas of living. Issues are addressed in moral and human terms rather than in terms of sickness and health. The frame of reference is philosophical rather than primarily medical, social or psychological. The assumption is that people need to find ways of making sense of life before they can make sense of their problems and of themselves.

It is often only at times of crisis that people become aware of the emptiness and ignorance of their lives. At these moments there can be a sudden urge to understand life better and to find meaning amid chaos and confusion. All too often people are at a loss for a place or a person to turn to for assistance in the process of clarification and discovery that they long for. Some may still find it through a church, others through medical care or psychotherapy. Few people are lucky enough to find a professional who can help them to sort out these issues without also putting them through religious, medical or psychological hoops.

A simple and down-to-earth method for helping ordinary people to get on with daily existence in a meaningful way was long overdue at the time this book was first conceived. These pages were an attempt to provide a first outline of such a radically existential method. Everything I say has evolved from a long process of practical application of the ideas of existential philosophers. The wealth of insight into human nature and understanding of life from that source has so far largely remained untapped. The various schools of existential analysis and psychotherapy have often remained secluded, exclusive and very theoretical. Moreover, the language of these approaches has usually been highly intellectual, abstract and enigmatic; enough so to put most therapists and counsellors off. Some other existential approaches have emphasized the political and social dimensions and have failed to propose an actual framework for practice. This book was part of the first wave to change this.

Humanistic methods, seen by some as a practical application of existential ideas, often involve a considerably positivistic bias. Humanistic forms of counselling and therapy are frequently highly technique-oriented and generally aim for quick pragmatic solutions and magical cures. Their emphasis is on self-realization and personal growth, attained through the pursuit of individual choice and freedom. They are the product of the American human potential movement and have recently returned in the form of positive psychology.

The European existential philosophers never suggested such simple, one-sided solutions and they examined the complexities of human living rather more carefully. They never intended to create the illusion of being able to solve the human dilemma. There is nothing in their writing that suggests the prospect of a paradise on earth, inhabited by self-actualizing individuals. Their aim has been to gain insight into the unavoidable paradoxes that life presents and to gain strength from that knowledge. This book is firmly based on the European tradition. It provides a framework and a method for tackling problems in living. It proposes a way of thinking, living and working rather than a technique and a list of skills.

In the introduction, a brief overview of the original philosophical influences on the existential approach is provided. This is a new addition for the third edition of this book and one that many had asked for.

The first chapter describes this particular existential method of working as an art and the therapeutic session is likened to a tutorial. The assumptions and goals of the approach are defined and the therapist's task is outlined.

The second chapter looks at the actual interactions between therapist and client and traces the process of existential counselling and therapy in terms of the impact on the client.

In the third chapter the basic model of working with the four levels of human experience is presented. I show how the different challenges on each dimension can be recognized and faced.

The fourth chapter goes on to explain the importance of helping people to take stock of their present mode of living. I pay attention to the way in which people's assumptions can be defined and taken into account as the indicators of their basic values and talents.

In the fifth chapter I explore various ways in which the therapeutic process can be enlivened and made more creative. This includes work with emotions, meaning, dreams and imagination.

The sixth chapter considers how people can be encouraged to come to terms with life, not through changing but through facing themselves against the background of their lives as they are. Making commitments in action and communicating with other people are also considered as part of the progress that people will make towards the creation of a fulfilling life.

Finally, a brief summing up will give some short and sharp definitions of existential therapy in conclusion. It will be more evidence of the eminently philosophical nature of this form of existential practice. Throughout the book ample illustrations are given of how the ideas can be practically applied. These pages are firmly based on work with clients, supervisees, students and trainees. But in final analysis it is the product of a continuing personal search for a meaningful way of living. As such, it can only be the first step on a long road into the future.

Introduction: The Origins of Existential Therapy

Socrates: the pioneer

It was Socrates who first conceived of philosophy, the love of wisdom, as a disciplined practice to help people live their lives in better and more truthful ways. It is Socrates, therefore, who should be credited with the merit of having created existential therapy and counselling. He lived and worked in Athens in the fourth century BC, two and a half millennia ago. He had an absolute commitment to truth-finding and dialogued with people in a therapeutic manner to help them clear their minds and come to a better understanding of their own ideas and ways of being.

Socrates compared himself to a midwife and called his method *maieutic*, which means birth-giving, since he saw himself as a mediator in bringing out the hidden truths from people's souls, literally helping them to give birth to what was important, essential and right. When Socrates spoke philosophically with his eager students or with ambitious politicians about how they thought they should live their lives, he invented the practice of philosophical dialogue as a process of dialectics.

This consists of inviting people to fully express their views and beliefs about an important topic and then to ask them pointed questions to make them think about it more carefully, challenging their assumptions and exposing their lack of logic and clarity. The idea is to awaken them and show them they are capable of much greater knowledge and understanding than they previously thought. Socrates' goal was to get people in touch with their capacity for incisive and clear thinking. When people are encouraged to look deeply into themselves and delve into the ideas they previously took for granted, the scales fall from their eyes and they become interested in pursuing truth. They also become engaged with the idea of right living and become better people for it. Socrates aimed to draw the best out of people and for this he used the dialectical method of opposing one idea with another, eliminating falsehoods and systematically building up the kind of true thoughts that can withstand challenge.

Socrates, who was a stonemason and an eminently pragmatic person and who had once been a rather good soldier, was strongly opposed to sophism. Sophism was an established and popular practice of argumentation and rhetoric at the time. It consisted of competitive argumentation for the sake of winning the argument. Sophists prided themselves in being able to bend people's minds any which way and their methods were used to help politicians or other power mongers to beat the

opposition. Sophism was an early form of spin. Socrates showed that it was not good practice to provide people with false interpretations and ideas that were wrong, even when such ideas seemed attractive, convincing and compelling. His contention was that speech and human living should be based in reality, truth and wisdom.

Socrates' objective was to help people understand important ideas for themselves so that they could learn to think for themselves. He insisted that it was necessary to live in a more aware and deliberate way, based on elemental wisdom, founded in what was truly right and wrong: according to what he called 'virtue'. His influence on young Athenians was tremendous, as can be seen in the writings of Plato, who described many of Socrates' dialogues with young aristocrats. One thing Socrates was reproached for is that he taught young people to rethink morals completely and to follow their own sense of virtue rather than that of standard and accepted moral rectitude. This was so controversial that he was condemned to death by the Athenian court. The speech in which he justified his philosophical practice (Plato, 2003) also gave the reasons why the judges would have to give him a death sentence and he fully accepted their verdict and died calmly in prison after drinking a cup of hemlock, while still lecturing his friends about the desirability of justice and the virtues of death. He believed that the unreflected life was not worth living and that our first objective should be to ask ourselves whether we are acting for the good or the bad.

Socrates interpreted the declaration by the Oracle of Delphi, which had said that there was no man wiser than Socrates, to mean that he was wiser than others who thought themselves wise, since he, unlike these others, knew that he really knew nothing and had to keep searching for truth. He also contended that he was being slandered for having shown all so-called wise, famous and powerful people as well as poets and artists to be in some ways fake and misguided. Furthermore, he spoke of the gods as mythical and of the sun as stone and the moon as earth, so that he was condemned for being an atheist and for agitating against established religious beliefs. He disdained the pursuit of money, honour and fame, to which his contemporaries seemed so committed, and believed it was time to speak up for the improvement of the soul.

Perhaps it is Plato's allegory of the cave that makes Socrates' idea of what a philosopher should be, most clear. In his *Republic*, Plato (2007) describes Socrates' metaphor of a cave in which most people are hidden away much of their lives. They sit chained to the ground and stare at a blank wall on which a continuous sequence of objects and events are being projected, over which they argue competitively without really knowing what they are talking about. They even give out prizes to those who make the best guesses about this sham reality. There is a striking resemblance with the contemporary reality of people living in a virtual universe where they content themselves with having and voicing strong opinions about things they have never actually experienced firsthand. Many of us obediently play the games and forget to live for real. Socrates describes the role of the philosopher as that of unchaining individuals to lead them out of the cave into the light, to experience reality firsthand. The philosopher's role is then literally to liberate and enlighten the previously chained up

prisoner. The idea of liberation and enlightenment is a good summary of the goal of existential therapy, as long as we remember Socrates' redeeming modesty in recognizing that truth is never known fully and that we will inevitably remain limited in our efforts to find it out. The other thing to bear in mind is his realization that most prisoners, feeling rather used to the relative safety of the cave, will be reluctant to be freed and made to confront the light. They might even be blinded by it, if forced to go outside too fast.

Socrates knew this all too well and was usually utterly confident in his commitment to seeking out truth, but hesitant in his confrontations of other people. Existential therapists should similarly have a commitment to working towards the best possible truth with their clients, without imposing unpalatable confrontations with reality on unsuspecting clients who are not ready for this. As a first rule of thumb, clients should always be allowed to take the lead in how far they wish to go with their own explorations.

From Athenian and Roman philosophers to existential philosophy

The philosophers Plato and Aristotle, who were deeply inspired by Socrates' pioneering work, each established a fully worked out philosophy of human existence in the decades to follow. They shaped and sharpened Athenian philosophy in their own way, creating entire systems of ideas, where Socrates had merely proposed a way of dialoguing and interacting with people, while setting a new moral standard. These fully formed philosophical systems and theories are fascinating and have much to teach us, but they are less directly relevant to existential therapists as a guide to practice, since they do not emphasize the interactive and therapeutic element as much. The same can be said for the many Roman philosophers who further developed philosophical ideas. Authors such as Lucretius, Epicurus, Zeno, Seneca, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius and Plotinus are well worth studying in their own right, as each comes up with a theory of human existence and a template for psychological change. Mostly, their objective was to stop getting upset about setbacks and pain, to toughen up in the face of difficulties and be detached enough to make the most of the good moments of human existence. Existential therapists often take great interest in these writings, but none is retained as representing the ultimate truth about the psyche or human existence. Each provides us with one possible interpretation of reality. Exposing ourselves to such a variety of philosophical views is a useful preparation for recognizing our clients' different worldviews.

Soon philosophy was to be taken over by Christian ideology and authors like Thomas Aquinas and Augustine used Platonic and Aristotelian Athenian ideas and integrated these with Christian dogma, which was often based in Roman notions of bearing one's suffering patiently while making the most of positive emotions such as love and charity. Christian philosophers were usually more interested in keeping

people within the fold than in liberating them. For many centuries it was the church that controlled people's minds and lives and that provided advice when things were going wrong. Philosophy was the handmaiden of the dominant religion during this period. But this all changed when philosophy became more objectively and scientifically focused in the Renaissance, with philosophers such as Erasmus, Galileo, Descartes and Spinoza all affirming new worldviews and challenging the status quo. This in turn led to the dominance of empiricism and the more rationalist philosophies of the Enlightenment. Now the field became very complex and vehement as public academic disagreements and debates ensued. People like Voltaire, Rousseau, Kant, Locke, Hume and Hegel launched new philosophical theories that aimed to accurately describe the whole of human existence. Each of them knew a certain amount of fame or notoriety in their lifetime. None of them was particularly interested in engaging young people or teaching existential skills. Here was the start of philosophy as an academic discipline when philosophers became increasingly disengaged from the real world and more absorbed in the attempt to reason logically and convincingly as they actively competed with the natural sciences as well as with each other. They became more and more concerned to be seen to be objective and to have contributed some ground-breaking new idea to mankind. Philosophers tried to invent great new ideas that could rival with the new discoveries in the natural world. It was only in the nineteenth century that some philosophers became tired of this game and refused to be caught in this impasse. They broke out of the pattern and reclaimed philosophy as the art of thinking and seeking out truth, and they appealed to the imagination rather than just to the mind. Established academic philosophers mostly considered them mavericks, but these philosophers of freedom were unafraid to follow their personal path regardless of this rejection. They reverted to doing philosophy for the sake of practical wisdom and followed in Socrates' original footsteps. Existential therapists owe a great debt to these philosophers of freedom and the breath of fresh philosophical air they dared to blow on to the scene.

Philosophers of freedom: Kierkegaard and Nietzsche

Søren Kierkegaard, working in Copenhagen, made a contribution that is very important for existential therapists, as he described his subjective experience of life as carefully as he could and gave us a sense of what philosophy might do to help an ordinary person to start thinking about his or her life. Like Arthur Schopenhauer, working in northern Germany, he took the view that the negatives had to be considered alongside the positives. Kierkegaard found that a personal confrontation with nothingness or death would inexorably lead to the experience of anxiety and despair. He came to believe that these experiences or the avoidance of them were at the core of the human condition. People could either dare to face the abyss, or try to run away from it. Alternatively, they might freeze to paralysis by the side of the precipice. Most

people he observed would just go along with the crowd and do what they felt was expected of them, in order not to have anything to do with the abyss, and so as to avoid having to think for themselves. This meant they never even got to confront the issues that really mattered, instead hiding away in ignorance.

Kierkegaard argued that we can only rise above the ordinary contradictions and difficulties of living by facing them squarely. He encouraged his readers to take the leap of faith and overcome doubt by daring to take a stance and not being afraid to live with pain and conflict and contradiction. He reintroduced the idea of a dialectical progression through life and described the path most people would go. People would generally start by preferring pleasure and enjoyment, then they would discover the necessity of following rules and become dutiful in abiding by the law and in doing their chores. Some time later doubt would arise, and if they persisted with this, they might then learn to think for themselves. Ultimately, he thought we can only save ourselves by taking a leap of faith and deciding to commit ourselves to an engaged life, trusting that this will be the right thing to do and standing bravely in the tension between freedom and necessity.

Such an engaged life demands that we dare to live in *Angst* and in despair.

These follow naturally when we become aware of the paradoxical tension between the infinity of the universe and our personal finitude. We are but creatures that must die and yet we aim to understand the cosmos in its eternal and endless possibilities. It is our awareness of these things that makes us dizzy with a sense of choice and personal responsibility.

> Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom, which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis and freedom looks down into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself. Freedom succumbs in this dizziness. (Kierkegaard, 1844/1980: 61)

For Kierkegaard, the solution was not to rid ourselves of despair and anxiety but to accept them and learn to live with them in a courageous manner. He famously said:

> Whoever has learned to be anxious in the right way has learned the ultimate. (Kierkegaard, 1844/1980: 155)

Nietzsche took a similarly vigorous stance in relation to human existence. He believed that suffering was not only unavoidable, but actually necessary in order for us to find and surpass ourselves and become deep enough to base ourselves in truth, courage and strength. Our will to become what we are, is the will to power, but this power is hard earned.

> The discipline of suffering, of great suffering – do you not know that only this discipline has created all enhancements of man so far? (Nietzsche, 1886/1989: 225)

While Kierkegaard still leaned on Christian notions of a redeeming relationship to God, Nietzsche contended that human beings had killed this God and that we had to take responsibility for our own values and well-being from here onwards. He thought people should learn to overcome and surpass themselves, in the Superhuman (*Ubermensch*). Like Kierkegaard, he believed this had to be done by facing the abyss.

> Man is a rope, fastened between animal and Superman – a rope over an abyss. (Nietzsche, 1883/1933: 43–44)

In order to do this, we have to find the strength to courageously affirm our fate and love it, no matter what. This is what Nietzsche called '*amor fati*' – the love of fate, even in the face of the possible eternal return of the same conditions we are living with right now. Again, his philosophy encourages deep thought and personal freedom and he provides much grist for existential therapists' mills and, like Kierkegaard, is essential reading for them.

Heidegger and existential phenomenology

Heidegger's work *Being and Time* (1927) was an important landmark for the philosophies of human existence, since he based his entire œuvre on describing human being in great detail, using his teacher Husserl's method of phenomenology in doing so. Heidegger spoke of human existence as dynamic and as constantly in movement in time. In fact, he contended that human beings are time and are therefore always passing from past to future and can never be at a standstill. They can therefore never be fully at ease, as they always experience themselves as no longer and not yet. One of the fundamental ontological givens, according to Heidegger, is that of discomfort, *Unheimlichkeit* (literally 'not at homeness'). We cannot overcome this as it is a given that ensues from the fact that we are thrown into a world that was already there before us and will still be there after we depart. We can, however, become authentically engaged with an understanding of our own limitations, the greatest of which is the fact that we will die and that in some ways we are dying a little bit each day.

Heidegger's challenge was for human beings to stop letting ourselves be taken over by the world of things and other people by becoming forgetful of ourselves. Instead of letting ourselves be taken over or fall in with others, we can allow ourselves to stand out in our appraisal of our past reality, our present situation and our future possibility, in what Heidegger termed the *ec-stasy* (standing out), which is a form of self- and life-awareness. This leads to the moment of vision, where we oversee the time that is ours right to its horizon in all directions and in one insightful moment. He wanted individual human beings to experience their personal call of conscience and showed how this was done by attending to existential anxiety and guilt. In this

he followed Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, viewing hardship and difficulty as important and necessary parts of coming to ourselves in depth. It is only in facing reality that we open ourselves up to truth and to existence.

This is when we become aware that as human beings we are not complete in ourselves, but are always in relationship. We are connected with the world, with others, with an image of ourselves and with our ideas, which help us go beyond ourselves to transcend our narrow preoccupations and concerns. The key to human authenticity is to face the reality of death and become what we are capable of being. It is this realism that saves us and frees us from being taken over by others or, as Heidegger put it, by the anonymous 'they'. As long as we follow the crowd and fall in with their opinions, without minding the very temporary nature of our existence, we fail to use our capacity for overcoming inauthenticity. When we do transcend our inauthenticity we become both anxious and vital, filled with life.

> Impassioned freedom towards death [is] a freedom which has been released from the illusions of the 'they' and which is factual, certain of itself, and anxious. (Heidegger, 1927/1962: 266)

To be true to who we are is to be aware of our connectedness and this makes us vulnerable. *Dasein*, or being there, is what human beings are, and this means that we are never just separate psyches that are cut off from their world, but that we always are in relation and in connection to a world. We are not separate, but are linked with things or people outside ourselves. We are concerned about the world because it matters to us greatly as we are thrown into it and are interdependent with it. We cannot be anything without it, so naturally we care. This means we can become easily estranged from ourselves and can also easily deceive ourselves. It is important to undeceive ourselves and liberate ourselves. Human beings are self-deceptive and forget what is really the case in the world. Philosophical thinking, Heidegger suggested, would save us from this forgetfulness and bring us back to deep, meditative thought, which is thankful thought. This is opposed to rational, calculative thinking, which we employ when we try to control and manipulate the world.

Finding a way towards truth is once more on the agenda. No wonder that Heidegger's work became instrumental not only in inspiring French existentialism, but also in making possible a whole renewed movement of existential therapy. In his later days Heidegger spoke more of the human capacity for releasement (*Gelassenheit*), or letting be, than of our capacity for resolution (*Entschlossenheit*), which had been his earlier preoccupation and which always remained very important in the French version of existential thinking. Both the concepts of resolution and releasement are about disclosing existence more effectively; in other words, they help us become more aware of what life really is about.

In resolution, we bravely face up to the limits of existence, recollecting the past and anticipating the future. In releasement, we let ourselves reach out and expand to

what is beyond us and we rely on it to be safe enough to surrender ourselves to it. We transcend ourselves and become released into Being, which we can now repossess. Heidegger also spoke of the way in which our feelings, or our attunement to the world, are central to our capacity for being what we are and for articulating what we experience.

Sartre and the existentialists

Sartre took these Heideggerian ideas and turned them into the very concrete philosophy of existentialism, which viewed the human condition as being based around choice and responsibility. We are our actions, he said (Sartre, 1943). Only if we act in the world do we have any reality at all. Nor can we rest on our laurels. We have to be engaged in the world actively, otherwise we disappear and become nothing. The only choice we do not have is not to choose our life, for not choosing is still a choice for which we need to take responsibility as well.

Sartre reinterpreted Heidegger's ideas about ontology (the science of being) in a concrete and ontic, facts-of-life kind of manner. Sartre argued in his *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre, 1943) that human beings are pure freedom, pure nothingness that aim to become something tangible in order to gain the solidity of an object. Because of this we all end up living in bad faith, with self-deception (*mauvaise foi*) at the core of our lives. We pretend that we are something we are not (in that we act into our roles and take ourselves overly seriously) or we pretend that we are not what we actually are (i.e. nothing). We try to impress and fool each other as much as we try to fool ourselves, but we never really succeed and always feel a queasy sense of discomfort at who we are, or rather at what we are not. We chase happiness by impersonating and pursuing certain ideas and objectives and are surprised when this does not work out. We think that somehow if we achieve our goals we can relax and feel good about ourselves once and for all. But life is not like that. We are bound to experience disappointment after disappointment until we have become disillusioned and are aware that life is essentially absurd and that we have to invent our own meanings.

Sartre also described how we manipulate our moods, magically falling into the emotions that suit us, as we try to transform the world. We are capable of so many tricks and ways of being that we end up believing we could be perfect. But this is a sad mistake as we are really nothing and can only pretend at being something, let alone something perfect.

Merleau Ponty, Camus, Beauvoir and others took these ideas even further. Merleau Ponty was particularly interested in the way in which human beings are embodied and cannot escape from their sensations and feelings. He spoke of ambiguity in relation to the fact that we are always formed and influenced by the world while at the same time trying to impact on the world in turn. This also affects how we feel about ourselves.

> …our contact with ourselves is necessarily achieved only in the sphere of ambiguity. (Merleau Ponty, 1945/1962: 381)

We cast our own shadows and there are not often blue skies without a cloud. We have to pursue our capacity for freedom in spite of all these complications. While human experience is difficult, it is still more worthwhile than stagnation. Merleau Ponty was keen for people to overcome the sedimented views they often have of the world.

Camus (1942) went a bit further still with the idea of human existence as an absurd struggle. For him it was not a matter of finding meaning because life intrinsically does not make sense. What is more important is to grasp the essential freedom of our being, which allows us to make meaning or find it outside ourselves. He argued that meaning is possible because of absurdity rather than in spite of it. It is our own challenge to find purpose, since none has been pre-prepared for us. Our struggles may seem like Sisyphean tasks, which are repeated on a daily basis, but we can find satisfaction in the very experience of the ordinary and menial tasks of existence if we focus our attention on the detail and bear in mind the context and create our own significant moments out of what we encounter. Courage and determination are far greater values than the pursuit of happiness.

Beauvoir agreed with this perspective and showed how people shape their own destiny in line with their original project. This project and personal objective needs to be rethought and renewed constantly as we are at risk of becoming caught in our own routines and, worse, in the roles other people have assigned to us. She believed that when we lose the capacity to connect to our project, we lose ourselves. She thought it was most important to live our lives passionately (Beauvoir, 1944), without using the excuse of life being difficult. Life is to be lived anew each day. We need to face up to the ambiguity, crisis, contradictions and dilemmas that we encounter. And most of all we need to form alliances with others, to do so, as we cannot achieve very much on our own.

Existentialism was followed by a range of structuralist, poststructuralist, and later postmodernist philosophies. Each explored the implications of Heideggerian philosophy in its own way. Authors like Foucault, Levinas, Ricœur and Derrida made very significant contributions that questioned truth and undermined established ideas. The deconstructing of assumptions and prejudice is an important part of doing existential therapy, but it can never be but one moment of a dialectical process and needs to be counterbalanced by the search for meaning, truth and wisdom.

Existential therapy rediscovered

With all this existential philosophical activity, from the start of the twentieth century a new movement of existential psychiatry and psychotherapy was also generated by a

number of practitioners who were inspired by the new phenomenological and existential philosophies described above.

Karl Jaspers, a German psychiatrist turned philosopher, was one of the first to try to describe the experience of people with mental illness in order to understand it and make sense of it in existential terms, rather than by diagnosing and labelling. He put the emphasis on the idea of human limitations. He described the importance of accepting these natural limits and using them as the lynchpin around which we become what we are capable of being. People avoid facing up to this. He said:

> In our day-to-day lives we often evade them, by closing our eyes and living as if they did not exist. We forget that we must die, forget our guilt, and forget that we are at the mercy of chance. (Jaspers, 1951: 20)

If we face the limits, we rise up and come to life. If we try to avoid them, we go under and become lost. Our difficulties and suffering are all about encountering these limits and it is in this confrontation that we become who we are. His practice showed that some people get into trouble by denying the limits and others by feeling destroyed by them. Either way, it is about failing to work within boundaries and realities.

Like Heidegger, Jaspers thought that man is inclined to self-forgetfulness. We are thoughtless and need to be roused from our dreamy avoidance of reality.

Everything we encounter or experience gives us a clue about what life is for and about. We need to learn to read these ciphers as a secret and sacred text that we can interpret and make sense of. This leads us to live our lives with heroic intensity in the world and with others.

Ludwig Binswanger (1963), a Swiss psychiatrist who was a friend of Freud's but never agreed with him, believed that psychotherapy needed to be focused on helping people to rediscover their spirit, their passion, their enthusiasm for life. He was greatly inspired by Husserl's and Heidegger's ideas and began to call his work 'existential analysis'. He focused on the philosophical dimensions of a person's world experience, such as our experience of space and time, and he used the phenomenological principle of describing instead of interpreting it. He would systematically plot a person's worldview in order to try to understand rather than analyse it. His work inspired that of Medard Boss (1957), who trained with him and who also worked directly with Heidegger for many years and who called his method Daseinsanalysis.

Revival of existential therapy

After these modest beginnings existential therapy began to inspire more and more people. The Second World War created a climate of fear and anxiety about the human condition that made many people more receptive to existential ideas. At the same time, several continental authors, such as Tillich, Lewin, Reich, Arendt and Buber, migrated to the USA and Israel, fleeing from persecution and spreading